

Sermon preached at St Anne's, Sale

**Theme: Sparkle for Cat**

Where I stand now is one of the last places where I last saw Cat stand. She had just co-led Sunday School on Palm Sunday and was telling the congregation, with her infectious energy, about what the children had been doing and showing us the art work that they had produced. She glowed with joy in sharing the Gospel story with the children and young families.

And I stand here now, as you sit where you are, with a bewildered sense of loss, of a chasm having opened up and into which all sorts of things, joy, laughter, sparkle, energy and love have disappeared.

J.K. Rowling created in her Harry Potter novels a form of life which we all recognise; the Dementor, who sucks energy and soul and humanity out of people. Rowling did not create the opposite for the opposite does not need to be created.

An early Christian philosopher, a bishop named Irenaeus, wrote these words; ***the Glory of God is a man fully alive***. Humans have the God-given capacity to bring joy and life, laughter and grace into situations and transform them when we are true to our vocation. And Cat was one such human, fully alive, fully alert to herself and to others. You are here because Cat was fully alert to you, giving of herself generously and fully.

We have heard an outline of Cat's life and you will have recognised, I hope, your place in that mapping process. And, in seeing those coordinates where you and Cat met, talked and experienced life, whether in what we might dare to call the real world or in the realm of social media, you will be able to reference in what ways Cat's personality and presence impressed itself onto you, and how you and your own reacted to that encounter. Your presence here today suggests that that initial and those subsequent meetings were uplifting and positive.

Back in the 1970s, a whole decade before Cat's favourite 1980s vibe, there was a TV comedy called *The Rise and Fall of Reggie Perrin*. Set in a dull office environment, Reggie had a hopeless son-in-law, Tom, who described himself as ***not a people person***. Cat was the diametric opposite, the very epitome of one who finds their vocation in a life given over in costly concern for others. I mean vocation in the way that people talk about priests, teachers and doctors having a vocation, a divine calling that works itself out in our choice of partner, profession and practice. Cat was a people person to the very core.

And this means, of course, that the Cat each of us knew, is but a shadow of the whole. Today, across the road in school, the children are holding a non-uniform day with the title ***Sparkle for Cat***, a fund-raiser for both the School and for MIND.

The beautiful picture of Cat on the front of the order of service is heart-breaking reminder of both the person and her style, energy and sheer capacity to exude joy. Like a wonderfully cut diamond, whose different facets glint in different light and from different angles, we will only ever have known some element, a facet or two, of who Cat is.

We are individually greater than the sum of the different stories people have to tell. Today, we hand back to God one who brought joy to so many;  
to Martyn and life to Sam and Ben,  
to we who are here,  
joy also to the lives of the many others whom she served in her various professional roles,  
and joy to those many others whose lives were brightened by the gift of encountering Cat, in all the various places where she lived and moved. We here are but the tip of the iceberg.

We hand Cat back to God. When she last stood here, she talked about the crowd waving Jesus into Jerusalem. Where her coffin rest now, on Maundy Thursday evening, Cat had her feet washed. She recognised her frailty, her vulnerable humanity and her dependence on the love and grace of God. We pray that as we wave her, by prayer, into God's presence, so he will welcome this, his daughter, into the heavenly realm, where Jesus has gone before.

So we give thanks to God for Catherine Dodsworth and pray for her.

And, as we do so, as we recall what it meant to receive one of her animated emails or experience her attentive gaze and reflect on the way in which one person can bring such delight in such a diverse set of people, the challenge is to ask about our own lives. In the old Book of Common Prayer, we can find these words; ***we also bless thy holy Name for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear; beseeching thee to give us grace so to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of thy heavenly kingdom.***

***Give us grace so to follow their good examples.***

Therein lies the challenge of today for us. Winding the clock back, wishing history were different, all those natural urges, take us nowhere.

If we learnt anything from Cat, we learnt that life is a gift to be embraced energetically and fully, even, as it did for Cat at various times, also bring with it the darkest days.

So the question that lies before us is how we, as individuals and as families, are to embrace the gift of life in the future. That ancient prayer, as ever, carries wisdom we need to hear. Those who go before us set examples and we need, judiciously, to learn from them, to learn from Cat.

We will, at the end of our service, step back outside of church, breath the fresh air and see the blossom. We can choose to embrace friend and meet stranger, sharing the common bond of Cat's very peculiar and unique hold on the gift of life. The challenge she leaves us with is about how we might live in the future.

We cannot live like Cat. Only she could do that. Only Cat could hear and honour her God-given vocation to be the person he called and equipped her to be. But we can live as God has called us to, generously, gently, graciously in ways to truly listen to the divine and honour in the way we inhabit the planet and treat each other with alert attentiveness.

Cat did not come to Church on Easter Sunday. She went to a family party. You can see her at that on the order of service, with Martyn, Sam and Ben. I remember her saying that this was unusual. We would have welcomed Sam in that service as a communicant member of the Church. Easter, the Resurrection is a wild, off-the-wall, sparkly declaration by God that death is not the final statement to be made about existence. The empty tomb challenges the narrative we have in our heads that this unexpected, unwelcome event, Cat's death is the last word. God has the last word. He has it now with Cat and he has it now with us.

Our psalm, 23, talks about the vagaries of life, it's ups and downs; those moments when all is fantastic, when we are caught up in joyful moments; and it talks about the opposite, the valley of the shadow of death, when we feel utterly overwhelmed and we cannot see beyond darkness. And it ends with a party. It ends with a table set out and laughter and hugs and acceptance and love. The writer of that psalm knows what it is to be human and what we feel today. And he says that life ends, with God, at a party.

That is the last word, God's last word. Death be not proud.

Cat Dodsworth. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.